

Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Mental Health
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senators,

Re: Inquiry into Mental Health

We have a son, Jason, with Schizophrenia. He was a Rubella baby and was born with impaired vision.

At 19 he started to suffer from schizohrenia. For several years, he put himself and us through hell. Then, because he was treatment resistant to all other anti-psychotic drugs, he was put on the drug, Clozapine. It changed his life and ours. Now, 10 years later, he leads a normal life, lives independently, and works part-time.

The ready availability of the most effective medication is the first requirement of people with mental illness.

Unfortunately, not all sufferers are 'compliant'. When they forgo their medication, believing they are better, their psychotic symptoms can resurface. These can be unimaginably terrifying and can cause the sufferer to become fearful, agitated, even suicidal. When this occurs the police are sometimes called to "control" the situation.

30% of incidents to which police are called involve someone with a mental illness. Such people are sick and in principle no different to someone with cancer, diabetes or a broken leg. They are not criminals or inherently violent. But they are irrational when suffering from acute psychosis.

Police need to be trained to recognize mental illness when they encounter it, and to act in a calming, conflict resolution manner. They must be educated to understand that these situations are different to their normal police work and cannot be controlled by force.

After medication, the most important factors in the rehabilitation of people with mental illness are family support and work. One hour per month with a case manager pales into insignificance compared to the time and effort put into the sufferer's welfare by his/her family.

Carers volunteer their time and expertise. They live with the problem. Programs to support carers must be developed, encouraged and maximized.

Work fulfills many social as well as monetary needs. Sustained unemployment leads to low self esteem. 80% of the mentally ill, who are already dealing with social stigma and a sense of guilt and non achievement, are unemployed. In a competitive job market, very few will ever be able to compete successfully for a job.

Governments need to support "social firms", whose primary aim is to provide employment for the mentally ill. Refer to www.socialfirms.org.au for more detail on the concept.

Yours sincerely,

